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# Landscapes of Wealth & Desire

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# **Landscapes of Wealth & Desire**

## **Histories of Value in Baja California Sur, Mexico**

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## SUMMARY

*This paper<sup>1</sup> explores the historical background to a proposed study of political disputes over the value of large-scale tourism development in Baja California Sur. The paper starts with a review of anthropological discussions of value -- focusing on the work of Kluckhohn, Graeber, Elyachar and Appadurai. The aim is to use an anthropological approach to value to place current conflicts over land and resources arising from recent developments within a historical perspective. The paper then investigates how actors in different time periods have contributed to collective and often contradictory constructions of the area as a place of subsistence, adventure, possibilities, salvation, investment, leisure and conflict. It is not a report on the contemporary situation, but rather it examines some of the key moments and events that have in the past created, reshaped, and defined Baja California Sur as a place of value, meaning, and importance. These episodes start with the Spanish contact period and focus primarily on the southern portion of the peninsula. [Value, tourism, development, Baja California Sur, Mexico]*

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## INTRODUCTION: A BACKWATER NO LONGER

On May 3, 1535, famed explorer Hernán Cortés landed on the shores of present-day La Paz in Baja California Sur (see Figure 1) with high hopes that he had finally found a legendary island full of gold (Leonard 1992; Alvarez, jr 1987; Crosby 1994). The following year, after spending vast amounts of capital and resources on the venture, the last remnants of Cortés' expedition set sail for Acapulco on mainland Mexico, abandoning the settlement as a complete failure. While Cortés had hoped to find an island full of wealth, he only found a few pearls and a hot, dry, desolate landscape with few native inhabitants (Crosby 1994: 4). It was, by many accounts, a place of little worth, especially for a conquistador who had sacked the capital city of the Aztecs fifteen years prior.

Cortés was, of course, several centuries too early to cash in on the popularity of international tourism and development that turned the desert landscape of Baja California Sur into a high-end tourism destination that includes everything from ATV tours and Costco to exclusive hotels, expansive golf courses, and even a Hard Rock Café. For more than four centuries after 1536, the landscapes of Baja California Sur remained difficult, perplexing, and challenging places for explorers and entrepreneurs who hoped to extract some measure of value from its territories (whether gold or souls). From pearl diving and missionary work to silver mining, relatively few were able to achieve long-term economic or political success. Baja California Sur remained economically marginal—at least from the perspective of outsiders—until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. And then something changed.

So what happened? How did this supposed “backwater” of Mexico suddenly rise to such prominence and economic importance? As urban sociologists John Logan and Harvey Molotch argue in their landmark text *Urban Fortunes*, “A place is defined as much by its position in a particular organizational web—political, economic, and cultural—as by its physical makeup and topographical configuration” (43-44). The landscapes and territories of Baja California Sur, especially those located near the coast, clearly underwent a radical repositioning within a particular political and economic network. With the onset of mass travel in the 1960s, improvements in transportation technology, and specifically the rising popularity of international coastal tourism, the same arid, seemingly worthless environment of Baja California Sur became the locus for the creation of Mexico's most prized tourism destination: Los Cabos<sup>2</sup> (Berger and Wood 2010).

The contemporary socio-economic importance of the coastal territories of Baja California Sur was only made possible by a shift in how various actors—from global tourists to Mexican State

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<sup>2</sup> This includes the present day cities and surrounding tourism zones of Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo.

officials—re-imagined and re-shaped the formerly “desolate” environment into a desirable destination for travel, leisure, investment, and even permanent residence. From particular perspectives (e.g. the Mexican State, investors, and developers), increased tourism development, along with sharply rising land values, are clear indicators of considerable success and economic “progress”. Los Cabos is, in many ways, a powerful symbol of prosperity in Mexico. But this is only part of the story. To quote the late Vine Deloria, “Into each life, it is said, a little rain must fall” (1985: 78).



Figure 1. Location of Baja California Sur.

In this case, the “rain” is the social and economic inequality that has been generated by Los Cabos. The urban *colonias* that ring the high-end tourism zone present a radically different picture of the “success” of tourism development in Los Cabos. Poverty, uneven development, unemployment, socio-economic segregation, and lack of access to critical resources such as water and land plague these settlements (Lopez et al 2006; Torres and Momsen 2005; Wilson 2008). This pattern of economic growth and consequent social inequality is a common theme for many tourism developments throughout Mexico, most notably Cancún (Hiernaux 1999, Castellanos 2010). The economic benefits of tourism development “successes” in Mexico are unevenly distributed, both spatially and socially. But this aspect of international and domestic tourism does not get that much attention.

The social, economic, and political restructuring of place in Los Cabos, and throughout the peninsula, is anything but uncontested, however. Sometimes it seems that powerful, larger discourses

—such as those that originate with state systems or international media—define these places, spaces, and territories. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2010), for example, claims that international tourism development is a “key driver” of socio-economic “progress” around the world. But what gets lost in such grand statements? According to this view, the Los Cabos tourism corridor, which has witnessed considerable tourism development, would stand as a major success and site of progress—and for some that is the case. But for others, this re-valuation, development, and transformation of place hasn’t resulted in prosperity. Despite the existence of prominent narratives and discourses that construct Baja California Sur as a place of successful, even “sustainable” development, there are other voices, other experiences, and other values that people attach to places, and they speak to some very different social and political realities.

These contested values and competing interpretations of place in Baja California Sur are by no means recent. By taking a historic look at how different people have engaged with Baja California Sur over time, this paper explores present conflicts over resources and ideas of place in light of the past. The current conflicts over the definition and control of the region are not new—they are just the latest acts of a long-running play. Here I investigate the various ways in which a multiplicity of actors—at various scales—have contributed to the collective and often contradictory construction of Baja California Sur as a place of subsistence, adventure, possibilities, salvation, investment, leisure, conflict—and ultimately value. These investigations are preliminary and suggestive, rather than definitive. Starting with the Spanish contact period, and focusing primarily on the southern tip of the peninsula (known as the cape region), the argument covers some of the key moments and events that have created, reshaped, and defined Baja California Sur over time as a place of value, meaning, and importance.

## **SOME NOTES ON VALUE**

Before going any further, it makes sense to establish a few foundations. My analysis focuses on the concept of value as it relates to the construction of meaning and place in Baja California Sur. I draw from the work of anthropologists, urban sociologists, and geographers in exploring what is admittedly an unwieldy concept. Theoretical discussions about value—the attribution of import or meaning to ideas, ways of life, goods, and/or actions—have a deep history in the humanities and social sciences, including anthropology (see Kluckhohn 1958; Appadurai 1986; Eiss and Pedersen 2002; Graeber 2001, 2011; West 2005; Hart 2011; Elyachar 2005). The term “value” is tremendously loaded

and complex. It sounds fairly simple to talk about the value of a place or an idea...but the more you dig into the concept the more difficult things become. That is because, as Graeber argues, while there are plenty of discussions about value, there is no clear theory of value per se. Part of the reason for this is that the term itself refers to a wide array of different—yet interrelated—understandings of what “value” is all about.

As Graeber (2001:1-2) explains, theories of value tend to fall into three overlapping categories: 1) values in the sociological sense (i.e. what is good or desirable for society); 2) the economic sense (how objects/goods are desired and measured according to a particular system of accounting, such as money); and 3) the linguistic sense (which Graeber glosses as “meaningful difference” within a larger structured system). Value in these various, interrelated senses is ultimately about how and why people rank, order, and organize their social worlds according to particular ideals, whether moral, cultural, or political. A truly exhaustive account of value should, as some argue, probably extend at least as far back as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and especially Karl Marx (Hart 2011), whose theories of value focused heavily on the critical importance of labor. Such a project, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. For the sake of conceptual clarity, I am going to limit my use of value to a few lines of thought derived mostly from relatively recent anthropological theories of value (although Marx does play a key role for many of these theorists). I draw primarily on Kluckhohn (1958), Graeber (2001), Elyachar (2005), and Appadurai (1986). Kluckhohn’s comparative project on value is a good place to start.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Clyde Kluckhohn launched an ambitious initiative aiming to make the scientific study of values the key concern of anthropology (Graeber 2001:2). Kluckhohn’s work focused mostly on a sociological sense of value, and attempted to analyze how and why different societies came to develop particular value orientations (Kluckhohn 1958). As Graeber explains, this early effort to analyze and cogently theorize value “ran most definitely aground” (2001:5). But it was not without merit. Foremost was Kluckhohn’s drive to find a way to push anthropology toward a study of social life that paid close attention to moral desires—or what individuals “ought to want” out of their lives (Kluckhohn 1958: 469; Graeber 2001:3). Kluckhohn advocated a study of values that sought to move beyond mechanistic assumptions about human choices and behavior:

We want to live in particular ways and toward selected ends. When the gap between actuality and aspiration is too great, individuals and indeed whole groups choose death rather than survival. For we human beings are not just pushed by our biological needs

and psychological drives; we are also pulled by conceptions of the right, the good, the desirable (1958:469).

He argued that since there are patterned “habits of thinking which individuals consciously learn and unconsciously absorb in their daily social experience” (1958:469), an empirically grounded and systematic study of values was possible. He was in search of the “codes which unite individuals in adherence to shared goals that transcend immediate and egocentric interest” (1958:470). Values for Kluckhohn “are cultural and psychological facts of a certain type which can be described as objectively as other types of cultural and psychological facts” (1958: 472). The only problem was that Kluckhohn’s value project was never able to actually achieve these ambitious goals, despite much effort from Kluckhohn and his research team. The key issue, as Graeber (2001:4) points out, was the difficulty of finding a way to relate this comparative project to specific choices, behaviors, and actions within a coherent framework. What was ultimately missing was “an adequate theory of structure” (Graeber 2001:5).

Although Kluckhohn’s project hit a dead end, and has had no intellectual legacy, maybe something worthwhile may be salvaged from his efforts. As Graeber explains, Kluckhohn’s key idea was that cultures differ not simply in what they believe about the world, but also in “what they feel one can justifiably demand from it” (2001:5). This is at heart a moral project. Kluckhohn tried to move beyond studies of belief and perception toward a comparative analysis of morally-based ideals and desires. While most anthropologists may consider Kluckhohn’s project passé or irrelevant today, maybe he was onto something after all. In Graeber’s words: “However primitive the models Kluckhohn actually produced, he did at least open up the possibility of looking at cultures as not just different ways of perceiving the world, but as different ways of imagining what life ought to be like—as moral projects, one might say” (2001:22). This takes us further than many of the approaches to value that followed his.

Kluckhohn provides the first key component, then, of how I want to approach value. Value is not just about market forces, and it is not intrinsically embedded in commodities, places, or other material things. Kluckhohn’s value project went beyond questions of supply, demand, and taste to embrace what people feel is socially and morally just. As one foundation for thinking about value, this requires us to think about how such conceptions are linked to actions and to larger cultural contexts.

David Graeber’s book, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, offers perhaps the most thorough anthropological investigation of value to date. I want to highlight two key components from



Graeber's discussions of value here. The first is a focus on *action*. The second is an emphasis on how these actions translate into wider *systems of meaning*. Graeber seeks to construct a theory of value that moves away from Saussurean structuralism on the one hand and from what he calls "economism" on the other. The problem with the former is that value is reduced to little more than "meaningful difference" (2001:46). With the latter, value is framed as a factor of individual choice and little more. Both frameworks are also hopelessly static; Graeber, following the lead of Nancy Munn, moves toward an understanding of value that is dramatically more dynamic (2001:46).

Munn argues that value emerges in action or through the process of creation itself. Value is not just an intrinsic property of objects, goods, services, or places. It has to be produced—within the context of surrounding cultural systems. This argument, which emphasizes both process and action, comes full circle back to Marx's theoretical discussions of value (which were, after all, very much about measuring value based upon human action—labor). Money, Graeber explains, is key to Marx's theory of value: "What money measures and mediates...is ultimately the importance of certain forms of human action (Graeber 2001:66-67). Money, which is an abstract yet ubiquitous representation of value, comes to signify the meaning and importance of human labor or what Graeber sometimes calls "creative energies" (ibid). While Marxists tend to focus on a fairly restricted understanding of human labor, Graeber argues that it might be fruitful to broaden our thinking and consider some other possibilities when it comes to labor and human action.

He writes, "One invests one's energies in those things one considers most important or most meaningful" (2001:45). Value, he argues, "is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves" (2001:45). This takes certain socially recognizable forms, whether kula valuables, currency, or credit cards. The important point is that these forms are not the actual source of value—they are just the medium through which value is created and passed around. Human *actions* produce value....and these actions take on meaning when they are understood within larger social and cultural systems. This brings us to the second point: these human actions and creative energies attain meaning when they are placed within expanded symbolic and social systems.

Graeber argues that value may be understood as how "actions become meaningful" within a larger social system, "real or imagined" (2001:254; see also Elyachar 2006:8)<sup>3</sup>. In order to understand the importance or meaning of a particular action, there has to be some reference to a surrounding totality. There must be some sort of comparison going on: "Parts take on meaning in relation to each

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<sup>3</sup> Compare this with Logan and Molotch's discussion about the definition of a place within particular political, economic, and cultural systems (1987:43-44).

other, and that process always involved references to some sort of whole: whether it be a matter of words in a language, episodes in a story, or ‘goods and services’ on the market” (Graeber 2001:86-87). The “real or imagined” aspect of all this is also important here. Graeber says that the process of creating value requires comparison, which necessitates some kind of audience. This audience may be real (e.g. direct social relationships) or imagined. “Society” is basically an imagined, totalized audience that people use to assess tastes, choices, desires, and values. This is akin to the “imagined communities” that Benedict Anderson (2006) wrote about, which are connected through shared ideals, ideologies, and meanings.

So we have to take account of action in value creation, and we need to pay attention to how those actions are linked to surrounding social, cultural, and political systems of meaning. This is where politics and power come into the equation. Graeber writes, “In any real social situation, there are likely to be any number of such imaginary totalities at play, organized around different conceptions of value” (2001:88). There is not just one system of meaning that people engage with or contest—there are multiple interwoven, contested, overlapping systems. The confluence of these systems leads to what might be called a “politics of value” (Graeber 2001:88; Appadurai 1986). For Graeber, competing or conflicting claims about value are always inherently political in nature (2001:115). Terry Turner, according to him, claims that the struggle to define value is “the ultimate stakes of politics” (2001:88). It would be ideal if value (i.e. what matters, or what is important and how that importance is represented) were determined through democratic, fair, and just decision-making processes. But Graeber and others argue that this is not the case (see also Elyachar 2005). The playing field is not level. This leads to the question of power.

Julia Elyachar writes, “The anthropology of value, which has a strong focus on symbolic meaning, can have politics at its center as well” (2005:7). Elyachar’s monograph, *Markets of Dispossession*, is a deeply ethnographic work exploring the politics of value through an extended, detailed investigation of workshops in Cairo. She draws from both Munn and Graeber to analyze how workshop masters create what she calls “relational value,” which “expresses the positive value attached to the creation, production, and extension of relationships in communities of Cairo” (2005:7). The power struggles in this case consist of conflicts between these workshop masters, the Egyptian state, international organizations, and NGOs, among others.

Her ethnography outlines a conflict between the intrusion of neoliberal market reforms and ideologies, on the one hand, and the morally-grounded economies of the workshop masters in Cairo on

the other. What is being “dispossessed,” she argues, is “the power to decide what matters or, in other words, what is value” (2005:8). Through a focus on neoliberal market reforms, Elyachar shows that “Markets are social and political worlds with their own cosmologies. Each is a cosmos of its own, an intricately functioning field of power” (2005:214). She challenges the utopian notion of neo-classical economists that markets are benign instruments which, if properly unleashed, will serve the interests of “society” at large<sup>4</sup> (Elyachar 2005:214). Instead, Elyachar argues forcefully that markets are highly political projects that have real—and often dramatically disparate—material effects. What all of this means is that economic expansion and development is anything but a value-neutral or objective process...no matter what many economists and development experts assert. Elyachar makes a solid case for the need to pay close attention to power relations, and more specifically to how different forms of power work, interact, and clash, in the ongoing politics of value.

Arjun Appadurai has explored the politics of value as well, but in a very different way. His approach, which draws a lot on the work of Georg Simmel, is far more economic in its focus. While Graeber seeks to shift the emphasis from a focus on things to an emphasis on actions, Appadurai explores the question of value by paying close attention to the “lives” of commodities. This is because he sees *exchange* as the key issue in value creation. What matters, ultimately, is how much someone is willing to give up in order to obtain certain goods and services. For Appadurai, value is ultimately based on individual desire (this is a different conception of desire than Kluckhohn sought to address). His analysis of the politics of value focuses on the struggles to control “flows of commodities” themselves, which is a decidedly market-based approach. Appadurai seeks to trace these commodity flows as they pass through different “regimes of value in space and time” (1986:4). He writes, “We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, and their trajectories” (1986:5). Although some aspects of Appadurai’s approach are problematic, I find the idea of “regimes of value in space and time” to be particularly intriguing and useful.

This framework, with commodities passing through different systems of meaning and their value related to this overall process, is yet another foundation for my current work on value creation in Baja California Sur. But it needs reworking a bit, mostly because the commodity in question is not a linen coat or a can of Coke—it’s a place. Land, as Polanyi once argued, is a commodity of a special kind. Logan and Molotch, following him, insist that land is 1) immobile, and 2) not originally

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<sup>4</sup> Notice how the abstract notion of “society” plays a key role in the value system of neo-classical economic thought. It is, as Graeber argues, an imagined totality that serves a comparative purpose within a particular system of meaning and politics.

produced for sale in a market (1987:23). This means that an analysis of how value is created in particular landscapes or places requires different considerations. Yes, there is an argument to be made that places such as Cabo San Lucas or La Paz are most definitely “produced,” but this is not the same as the production of traditional commodities like coats—or iPods for that matter. The “regimes of value” in this case are the ideas, beliefs, and predilections of people, past and present—and these work to shape and define the meaning and value of particular geographic places. These systems of meaning overlap, clash, coalesce, and break apart. In what follows, I seek to trace the historical trajectories of value embedded in specific places.

### **AMAZONS & PEARLS: 1533-1697**

Before a single European even set foot on the territories of present day Baja California Sur, the imagined possibilities of the place had already been influenced by a powerful source: literature. In 1510, Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo first published *Sergas de Esplandian* (the exploits of Esplandian), a sequel to his previous successful series called *Amadis de Gaula*. All of these books were written in a genre that was widely popular in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain: the “romances of chivalry,” which were

usually long accounts of the impossible exploits of knightly heroes in strange and enchanted lands inhabited by monsters and extraordinary creatures, and they presented a highly imaginative, idealized concept of life in which strength, virtue, and passion were all of a transcendent and unnatural character (Leonard 1992: 13).

Throughout the century, upwards of ten editions of the *Sergas* were published (Leonard 1992: 17; Martinez 1960: 90). The main story of *Sergas* recounts the adventures of Esplandian, the son of Amadis, who eventually falls in love with Calafia, the formidable Queen of Amazon women who inhabit a rocky, gold-laden island named “California” (Leonard 1992: 38; Martinez 1960: 90; Alvarez jr. 1987: 12-13). One of the crucial aspects of this literature is that it often incorporated narrative components of contemporary historical accounts, leaving audiences convinced that such tales were literally true. Leonard argues that there was widespread belief in tales such as *Sergas de Esplandian* and that they influenced the ideas and actions of Spanish conquistadors, from Columbus to Cortés (Leonard 1992: 13-14). In fact, belief in the actual existence of Amazons was so pervasive that the “contractual agreements between conquistadors and their financial backers...frequently included clauses requiring a search for these mythical women” (Leonard 1992: 36).

The legend of an island full of warrior women dates to ancient Greece, and similar stories were

passed around throughout the Middle Ages by famous travelers such as Marco Polo, Sir John Mandeville, and Pedro Tarfur (Leonard 1992: 37). These Amazon women have been reported everywhere from Asia Minor to West Africa, but the exact location of their island home always remained (conveniently) vague (ibid). While several explorers repeated similar narratives about these famed female warriors in their letters and publications, Leonard (1992: 38) argues that the popular myths of *Sergas de Esplandian* may have been the main source for the dramatic prevalence of these themes in the minds of 16<sup>th</sup> century conquistadors. Leonard even suggests that the author, Montalvo, may have in heard of Columbus' reports of seeing Amazon-like women in the Caribbean and added those details to his story about Esplandian to capitalize on the popularity of the legend (Leonard 1992: 39). One passage of the *Sergas* about women who “dwelled in well-formed caves” echoes Columbus's earlier report (ibid).

One key passage from Montalvo's romantic novel may have played a critical role in the motivation to explore the lands that were later called California. In Chapter 157 we read:

Now I wish you to learn of one of the strangest matters that has ever been found in writing or in the memory of mankind...Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California, very close to the Earthly Paradise, and inhabited by black women without a single man among them, for they live almost in the manner of Amazons. They are robust in body with stout, passionate hearts and great strength. The island itself is the most rugged with craggy rocks in the world. Their weapons are all of gold as well as the trappings of wild beasts which they ride after taming, for there is no other metal on the whole island [in Leonard 1992: 39-40].

Editions of these books were widespread in key Spanish cities, including Toledo, Salamanca, Burgos, and Seville—the last being a primary place from which conquistadors embarked for the New World (Leonard 1992: 41). Editions of the *Sergas* were published in 1521, 1525, and 1526—all around the time that Cortés and his legions were conquering New Spain (ibid). In 1524, Cortés repeated rumors about this mystical island and its inhabitants in his reports to the Spanish emperor, Charles V (Miller 1974: 6; Leonard 1992: 41). He explicitly expressed his intent to “discover the truth” about the famed island (Miller 1974: 6).

By 1530, Cortés received authorization to explore the western ports of New Spain. This authorization also granted him the power to govern any new territories he discovered. In 1533 he sent two ships into the gulf, but they were separated, and one quickly returned to port in Acapulco. The

other, the *Concepción*, headed west and anchored in the bay of what the crew thought was an island (Miller 1974: 7). This was, in fact, the bay of La Paz (see Figure 2). Its captain “received no welcome and from the outset the peninsula became known as inhospitable country” (ibid). The captain and most of his crew were killed by the inhabitants of the new land (most likely the Guaycara), but one survivor managed to get back to the mainland and informed Cortés about the discovery, which was supposedly an island laden with gold and pearls (ibid).



Figure 2. Map of key cities mentioned in the text. Note: Los Cabos includes the cities of San Jose del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas.

Cortés set sail late in the year of 1534 for what became “California,” in the hope of exploiting its resources (Crosby 1994: 4) and finding the legendary island of the Amazons. Ultimately, he found neither. The La Paz colony struggled from the start, and by 1536, Cortés returned to New Spain to “defend his rights of conquest and acquisition” (Alvarez Jr., 1987: 14). He never went back to the peninsula, which remained “unsettled” or, perhaps more accurately, unconquered, for the next century. Still, it held strategic importance for Spain, as one of the resting stops for Spanish ships traveling the Manila Galleon route (Ibid: 15). Cabo San Lucas, at the very tip of the peninsula, was a convenient waypoint for ships traveling in and out of New Spain.

For the remainder of the 16th century, the Spanish had little success with their attempts to establish settlements and harbors in Baja California. In the context of Spain’s overall colonial project

on the mainland of New Spain, the peninsula held a marginal position (Alvarez, Jr., 1987: 16). The presence of English and Dutch pirates made the region even more inhospitable (*ibid*). Between 1533 and 1680, each attempt at settlement ended in failure. According to Alvarez, Jr., “Baja California provided no riches, no great cities, and no great populations to evangelize. Furthermore, colonists saw Baja as a barren wasteland in which the European could not live” (1987: 16). Some, however, did manage to find value on the peninsula.

Upon landing in La Paz in 1535, Cortés wrote to Cristobal de Oñate saying that he had discovered a land rich in pearls (Gerhard 1956: 239). While this news was certain to arouse interest, there are no records to indicate that any substantial attempts at pearl exploitation took place for the next fifty years. This may have been due in part to the perceived difficulty of such a venture after Cortés’ failure (Gerhard 1956: 240). The viceroy of New Spain granted three men the exclusive right to the pearl fisheries from the present-day state of Jalisco to the coasts of California. This virtual monopoly was broken in 1593 when Sebastian Vizcaino filed a legal suit and gained his own license to exploit the region’s pearls. From around 1600 onward, various licensed and unlicensed individuals took part in this resource extraction. According to Gerhard, “There is reason to believe that pearl hunting in Lower California became a well-established industry after about 1625, with frequent expeditions setting out from Chacala, Matanchel, Chametla, and other ports on the west coast of New Spain” (1956: 242). By 1685 profits from pearling were already dropping and, upon the arrival of missionaries in 1697, life became even more difficult for the pearlers. The coming of the missionaries meant the loss of a primary labor pool (the California Indians) and also increased government oversight (Gerhard 1956: 244-245). The pearling industry continued well into the missionary period, but “serious depletion” of the resources was already apparent by the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

It is not difficult to accept that the discursive literary tales of writers such as Montalvo had significant effects on the imaginations of Spanish captains, generals, soldiers, sailors, investors, and others who engaged in the conquest and exploitation of the Americas. “There can be little doubt,” writes Leonard, “that a factor in creating the fantastic illusion of the Conquest in the minds of so many participants was the multitude of fables, myths, and legends that so completely possessed their imaginations” (Leonard 1992: 314). Much like TV and internet media of today, these popular discourses had their own material effects, even if they are, ultimately, difficult to measure directly.

Clearly, however, these legends and narratives helped to fill this western edge of the Spanish empire with intrigue—and ultimately high social and political value, at least for a while. The myths of

Amazons and islands full of gold and pearls swept across the New World, always located just out of reach, on the horizon, were also undoubtedly spurred by inaccuracies and blunders born out of poor language translation and fevered expectations of wealth and success (Leonard 1992: 45). These discourses, mixed with political, economic, and strategic motivations from the sovereign down, encouraged people to traverse incredible distances and explore unknown places—all without any realistic idea of what to expect at the end of the journey. The search for value, then, is also about what Graeber calls “creative action”; the potential value of those territories depended on marshalling political and financial support from key individuals, as much as it was about literally sailing to the peninsula and attempting to extract resources or secure a territory. Baja California Sur was shaped, from the start, by a constellation of ideas and desires, which led to the interlinked fates of native populations and these Spanish argonauts. The actualities, once the boots hit the sand, were another matter. Regardless, the process continued, as previous discourses, ideas, stories, and narratives led to even more interest in the peninsula. One map always seems to lead to another. It is just a matter of time. For the early conquistadors, the Baja peninsula was desirable and valuable because of its potential material wealth. For a wave of new explorers who came more than a century later, value was measured in terms of human souls.

### **JESUITS: 1678-1767**

In 1678 the Spanish made a second serious attempt at colonizing the peninsula of California. The Jesuit priest, Eusebio Francisco Kino, who became one of the driving forces behind the settlement of Baja, arrived in 1683 as part of a “government-backed effort to colonize the California peninsula” (Crosby 1994: 8). Kino was enlisted in the expedition as a geographer, mapmaker, and missionary (Crosby 1994: 8). They established a settlement at San Bruno, located about 20 km north of present day Loreto. The endeavor was a financial disaster, and Admiral Isidro de Atondo y Antillón, leader of the expedition, blamed the failure on the “sterility” of the new land. This “helped to create a perception of California that dealt a severe blow not only to the continuation of his own venture, but also to the prospects of anyone who might later try to raise money for an occupation of the peninsula” (Crosby 1994: 10). The project was abandoned, as was the colonization of the peninsula of California. Father Kino, however, was determined to establish a mission in California, and spent years working toward his goal. Contrary to conquistadors, pirates, pearlers, colonists, and common soldiers, Kino envisioned the wealth of California not in terms of economic resources, but souls. He remained steadfast in his



desire to Christianize the native people of the distant peninsula that had repelled his earlier efforts (Martinez 1960: 118).

Kino, with fellow Jesuit Juan Maria Salvatierra, began working toward finding a way to implement his missionary plans. Both Kino and Salvatierra agreed that the primary reason for the failure of the first attempt at colonization was conflicting agendas between the parties involved. The missionaries, soldiers, and colonists all had different motives, expectations, and desires—and this was exactly what Kino and Salvatierra needed to control (Crosby 1994: 12-13). By 1696, Salvatierra and Kino were able to convince Spanish religious and political authorities to develop missions in California (Alvarez, Jr. 1987: 19). Due to an insurrection in Sonora, however, Kino was unable join the 1697 expedition to California. His religious superiors ordered him to remain in the tempestuous region where he held considerable influence; they felt he was far too valuable to be sent to some distant frontier (Crosby 1994: 23). Salvatierra continued on, with the help of the newly enlisted father Francisco Maria Piccolo. Along with Captain Luis de Torres y Tortolero, three mainland Indians, and five soldiers, Salvatierra set sail for the peninsula. They landed at the site of the present day city of Loreto, which is located on the lower third of the peninsula. Eventually, “This small group formed the basis for a successful settlement and for the establishment of a permanent *mestizo/criollo* populace in the Californias” (Alvarez Jr., 1987: 19). Within two years of landing, Salvatierra and his compatriots forged a settlement that included about seventy colonists.

Over the next three decades, four missions were built on the cape in the pueblos of La Paz (1720), Santiago (1724), Todos Santos (1733), and San Jose del Cabo (1730). Disease and social conflict, however, threatened these sites almost immediately. “Pestilences,” writes Crosby, “had ravaged every band of the cape’s people” (1994: 111). In addition, the missionaries zealously undermined the cultural and social ways of life of the native populations. One particular campaign against polygamy took place in 1733; this effort generated heavy resistance and enmity from the local Pericú people, and fueled aversion to life in the mission system (Crosby 1994: 111). The missionaries argued that the Pericú were the unwitting victims of devious leaders who immorally took multiple wives (*ibid*). Syphilis swept across the population, killing females disproportionately, and sending shockwaves through the Pericú social order. Polygamy was a common practice among Pericú leaders, and the missionaries struck at the heart of this custom by actively trying to recruit young women into the mission order (Crosby 1994: 111).

Political leaders and shamans fought back with a vengeance and resentment between the

Spanish and native populations grew. At this point, half of the cape region's population was already dead from epidemics. Rumors of insurrection spread throughout the three southern missions. By October of 1734, two Jesuit padres, two servants, and one guard were killed in the missions at San Jose del Cabo, La Paz, and Santiago (Crosby 1994: 115). All four of the missions were destroyed in the uprising, leaving the Jesuits in a precarious position on the cape. The Jesuits appealed to help from the rest of New Spain, and this brought about a radical shift in the power dynamic of the population. Kino and Salvatierra's original plan for a mission system controlled by a predominantly theocratic agenda fell apart (Crosby 1994: 129). Ultimately, while the rebellion temporarily freed the native populations in the cape region from missionary control, their situation dramatically degraded shortly thereafter. Plagues continued to decimate the population. More importantly, the power of the Jesuits slowly began to crumble, opening up the region to external populations—many from the northern part of the peninsula—who sought new economic opportunities in the south.

Despite numerous conflicts, the decimation of native populations, and decades of adversity, by 1767 the Jesuits still managed to establish fourteen mission sites throughout Lower California. That was also the same year they were expelled from the New World, in part due to competition from other religious orders and the widespread perception that the Jesuits possessed too much political power. In 1772 the two Californias (which included the present day state of California in the U.S. and the two states of Mexico now known as Baja California and Baja California Sur) were divided into different administrative units due to conflicts between the Dominican and Franciscan orders, who took over control of the missions throughout the Californias. The Franciscans took control of the upper territory of California, leaving the lower part of California under Dominican jurisdiction. This division was formalized in 1804, when the territories were officially split into Alta and Baja California (Alvarez, Jr. 1987: 25). Spain concentrated its efforts on the exploitation of Alta California, while Baja served as a launching point for those efforts. Baja California was not, by any means, a focal point of colonial interest or exploitation for the Spanish (and this continued under the new Mexican state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). This relative lack of attention paved the way for the incursion of foreign interests in the 19th century.

Before moving on, however, we should take note of how the Jesuits inscribed value on the Baja peninsula. The place was clearly located outside the primary interests of the Spanish Empire, yet a few key individuals were driven by their desire to spread their ideologies to new lands, to save new people. In this way, these territories became valuable in a very different way: primarily because they were *terra*

*incognita*, located outside the civilized, Christianized world. Kino and Salvatierra sought a kind of value that was bound within deep ideological and cultural systems of meaning...but the realization of those values also depended on the actions (as Graeber argues) and work (as Marx tells us) that were required to build the missionary structures and networks. Unlike the earlier Spanish colonists, the Jesuits were not interested primarily in economic or political gain—at least not explicitly. The value of Baja California, for them, rested on a worldview framed in terms of faith, fate, and a zealous sense of duty. It was yet another form of value that arose, coalesced for a short time, and then slowly crumbled—like Cortés’s dreams before—and gave way, eventually, to new values, desires, and hopes in the centuries to come.

## **THE OTHER CALIFORNIA**

In the early 1800s, American, English, and Russian hunters and traders, attracted by the rich sea otter colonies in Baja California, began to establish trade networks along the peninsula. American traders made a base in the San Quintin area (in the northern part of the peninsula), and commerce increased in spite of Spanish efforts to quell the operations (Alvarez, Jr. 1987: 25). After the Mexican Revolution, the newly formed nation of Mexico revived interest in mining as one means of developing its economy and of creating much needed post-war capital. This included willingness to allow foreign investment in mining industries within Mexico (Alvarez, Jr. 1987: 25). Interest and investment in mining on the mainland—primarily by the British—waned by the 1840s. At the same time, however, the otter trade and whaling in Baja California was on the rise, drawing in both American and British whaling fleets. The Mexican-American War, which took place between 1846 and 1848, interrupted this period of increased foreign exploitation of Mexico’s—and Baja California’s—resources.

US President James Polk was intent on expanding the nation’s territorial bounds, and the western territories of California and New Mexico were among his prime targets (McPherson 1988: 49). Polk originally attempted to buy the territories from Mexico, but when the latter refused, he opted to use military force. What Polk and his compatriots really wanted was Upper California, which would not only expand the geographic territory of the US, but also assure control of critical coastal ports, such as San Diego, San Francisco, and Monterey. Lower California was a secondary interest. With the aid of internal insurrection and naval occupation of key ports, the conquest of Upper California was relatively swift. By the end of July 1845, in fact, Polk believed that he had undisputed control of the entirety of the Californias, despite the US military not having stepped foot on the lower peninsula

(Chamberlain 1963: 50). The war did finally arrive in Baja California in 1846, when Commander S.F. Dupont sailed into the harbor at La Paz in order to blockade the west coast of Mexico (Chamberlain 1963: 50). There was no resistance from the population at La Paz, which was declared “neutral” by the territorial governor, Colonel Francisco Palacios de Miranda. Undoubtedly, the governor gambled on having picked the winning side (he was later reviled in the histories of Baja California as a cowardly traitor; see Martinez 1960). Dupont then continued on to Loreto, Mulege, and then San Jose del Cabo before heading back to the port of Monterey in Upper California. In 1846, Polk announced to the US congress that the conquest of the Californias was complete (Chamberlain 1963: 51).

The only problem was that US control of certain parts of California—especially Lower California—was tenuous at best. The US secretaries of War and the Navy, along with Commodore Robert F. Stockton, acknowledged this situation (Chamberlain 1963: 51). In February of 1846, Stockton ordered Commander John B. Montgomery to establish a more forceful US presence at the coastal towns of San Jose del Cabo, La Paz, and Cabo San Lucas (*ibid*). By April 14, all of these ports were “pacified,” along with the pueblo of Loreto. In each of these pueblos, there was little resistance to the US forces. The US flag replaced the Mexican flag in both Loreto and La Paz, and Montgomery granted “all peaceably inclined persons” the rights of US citizens (*ibid*). Having underestimated resistance, the US left many of these towns with little military protection. This incited repeated complaints from the citizens of San Jose del Cabo, for instance, who appealed for a garrison to protect them from “the rancheros and Mexican troops inland”<sup>5</sup> (Chamberlain 1963: 51). Open fighting between the US and Mexico erupted with the Battle of Mulege in 1847. By the time of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February of 1848, the territorial conflict over Baja California between the US and Mexico was a draw, at best (Chamberlain 1963: 57). While the US repelled Mexican troops from La Paz, Mulege, and San Jose del Cabo, they held only superficial control of the peninsula, whose inhabitants put up fierce resistance (especially when compared to Upper California).

Baja California remained a part of Mexico, ultimately, because Polk never actually demanded the territory during the formal treaty process. He sent Nicholas Trist to Mexico City to negotiate with General Santa Anna’s government, with the explicit command to secure Upper California and New Mexico, but not Lower California (Chamberlain 1963). If Polk had made Baja California a part of the treaty, is it very likely that it would have become a part of US territory, despite the disputes on the ground. While Trist was in Mexico working on the final treaty terms, the Polk administration actually

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<sup>5</sup> Considering the fact that the present day population of Los Cabos has many expatriate migrants from the United States, the allegiance of the town of San Jose del Cabo during the Mexican-American War is of particular interest.

changed its demands and decided that they did in fact want the peninsula. After realizing the high costs of the war, Polk felt that the US deserved more territory than the original treaty demanded. By the time this change of heart reached Trist in Mexico, however, the original terms had already been agreed upon. While the Mexican government initially put off negotiations with Trist, once they received news of a possible change of terms, they probably did all they could to agree to the original terms (Chamberlain 1963). Thus, a measure of diplomatic blundering and carefully timed obfuscation on the part of the Mexican government probably saved the peninsula for Mexico.

With the onset of the California Gold Rush in 1849, Baja California received considerable domestic and international attention, as many new prospectors, migrants, and travelers arrived in the hope of cashing in on the mineral wealth of the Californias (Alvarez, Jr. 1987: 28). In 1857 president Benito Juarez enacted measures that once again loosened restrictions on foreign investment and development in an effort to stabilize the nation's shaky economy (Meyer et al 2003: 385). The *Porfiriato*, which lasted from 1877 to 1911, resulted in an even stronger push toward development through foreign capital investment. The trend extended to Baja California as well, and foreign investment was dominated by businesses from the United States. Mining once again gained prominence throughout Mexico, spurred by technological advances (Alvarez, Jr. 1987:31). While mining operations in Baja California increased in number, the peninsula remained in a relatively marginalized position in the larger Mexican economy (Taylor 2001: 464). According to Alvarez, Jr., "As in the colonial and missionary periods, Baja's main barrier to settlement and development continued to be physical geography" (1987: 32). This daunting geography continued to play a key role in shaping discourses and attitudes about the peninsula for decades to come. However, there were some early hints of a perceptual shift, foreshadowing a dramatic change in how people imagined and valued the landscapes of Baja California Sur. The very same rugged landscape that forestalled "development" and conquest for generations became *the attraction* for outsiders in search of new experiences in exotic, "natural" places.

## **UN PAISAJE DEL TURISMO (A TOURISM LANDSCAPE)**

In 1897, Swedish-born Gustav Eisen published a short paper about his explorations of the cape region of Baja California Sur. According to Jane Radcliffe, "Eisen's interests were numerous and he has been described as a horticulturalist, a biologist, a zoologist, an artist and illustrator, an archaeologist, a viticulturalist, anologist, arborist, microbiologist, cartographer, explorer, and would be

considered today to be a pioneer conservationist” (Radcliffe nd). His paper reads, in some senses, as a scientific account, since he describes the temperature, climate, rainfall patterns, watersheds, mountains, geology, and “botanical and zoological features” (Eisen 1897: 278) of the region. It also reads, however, as a tourist travelogue:

No one seemed to know that the southern part of the peninsula of Baja California, the country from La Paz southwards, possessed entirely different features from those of the country northward. And, indeed, when I first arrived there it was a surprise to see that, instead of landing on a barren waste, I had before me a tropical country, with luxuriant vegetation, and with many other attractions, at variance with what I had surmised from the few and scanty descriptions that had been published [Eisen 1897:271].

Eisen traveled to the cape region four times in all; three of those were “under the auspices of the California Academy of Sciences” to explore the landscape and collect faunal specimens (Eisen 1897: 272). He recounts tales of scaling unnamed peaks<sup>6</sup>, notes how suited the clear skies are for astronomical observation, and points out “the finest spring” he has ever seen in San Bartolo.

Eisen laments the lack of “taste for athletic exercise” in Mexico, noting that there is no sierra club, no mountaineering club, and “no desire to enjoy the sublime scenery of the high mountains” (Eisen 1897: 277). He goes on to explain that there was a dismal lack of record of ascents for the highest peaks in the region, and writes this off due to the fact that “the natives are satisfied to look at the mountains from below or to engage in deer-hunts in the more accessible places” (ibid). By the end of his article, the once foreboding natural environment of the southernmost part of Baja California Sur sounds like a paradisiacal natural wonderland. This seems to be an early salvo in a complete revaluation of these once feared and spurned landscapes. About a century later, the Mexican government, along with a cadre of hoteliers and developers, caught onto the economic potential of turning the landscape itself into a lucrative commodity.

In the late 1960s, inspired by the success of coastal tourism destinations such as Acapulco, a team of Mexican bankers, planners, economists, and developers crafted a plan to create five regional coastal tourism destinations. The chosen sites were Cancún, Loreto, Huatulco, Ixtapa, and San Jose del Cabo in the cape region of Baja California Sur (Clancy 2001: 50). These marginal places were suddenly seen as potential sources of tremendous value, precisely because of the shifts in the global economy that

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<sup>6</sup> These peaks, of course, had to be named: “With the right of every explorer, we have named some of the mountain peaks ascended by us, and which previously had no name. Thus in the El Taste region we named Mt. Troyer and Mt. Molera after members of the California Academy of Sciences” (Eisen 1897: 277).

were taking place. Middle-class American tourists were the prime target market for this development plan; Mexico sought to create destinations that could compete with the popularity of Caribbean tourist sites (Clancy 2001: 53). San Jose del Cabo was likely chosen, in part, because it was already a favored destination for US expatriate sport fishermen, surfers, and other adventurous travelers who were willing to brave the long, dusty drive down the peninsula in Steinbeck-esque campers, trucks, and Jeeps. These populations, like Eisen before them, contributed to a reconstruction of the cape region as a desirable, valuable destination and romantic frontier for travel and leisure. By literally paving the way for future travelers, tourists, pleasure seekers, investors, and developers, these early migrants mapped new economic social values onto the cape region. This re-mapping or re-imagination of place had powerful economic and material consequences.

These histories lead back to my earlier discussion of the shifting nature of value. If value is, as Graeber argues, the way that society measures the importance of its actions, what do the histories of Baja California Sur tell us? The historical examples I have presented clearly illustrate how the same place may embody very different political, economic, and cultural values and meanings, depending on how it is situated within wider social networks. As the interlinked histories of the humans and landscapes of Baja California Sur show, there is no single way of a place to embody value, meaning, and importance. The social, political, economic, and even metaphysical meanings and values of the cape have all shifted dramatically over time—depending on the perceptions, desires, and expectations that various actors brought with them and the material effects of their actions once they arrived. Value, then, is not just the product of ideology *or* actions. It is instead a complex, dynamic combination of the two. As Marx suggests, value is the result of dialectical, not dichotomous processes that are ongoing. The importance or value of Baja California Sur has risen—and imploded—because of an ever-changing, unpredictable amalgamation of subjective understandings and very concrete actions.

Today, tourism and development media promote the landscapes and marine environments of Baja California Sur's cape region as luxurious, high-end destinations for adventure, travel, romance, relaxation, and exploration. These discourses emphasize the natural environment, focusing on everything from the azure waters to isolated beaches and the austere beauty of the desert environment. But the value of these places for mass tourism was only made possible by a change in global travel from the 1960s, along with the rise of middle classes (many of them from the US) who had the time and resources to travel for pleasure (Gmelch 2004: 7). Combined with the earlier actions and experiences of expatriates who literally laid the groundwork for future development in places like Los

Cabos, these re-imaginings and reconstructions of place coalesced with concrete actions to turn a once barren, isolated, seemingly treacherous territory into an appealing product, ready for consumption.

Yet, like the historical discourses and ever-shifting imaginaries of the cape region, these conceptualizations of place are not without conflict and contestation. The “progress” of tourism development is not shared by everyone, as the urban *colonias* just outside of the international airport in San Jose del Cabo so forcefully attest (Lopez et al 2006; Wilson 2008). While many international organizations, individuals, investors, and other stakeholders—including the Mexican government—continue to hedge their bets on this newest imaginary of the peninsula, it remains to be seen whether the benefits are truly “sustainable,” or if this is yet another elusive, romantic vision laden with false dreams and Quixotic values.



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## **APPENDIX: A Few Photographs & Notes from Baja California Sur, 2005-2010**



Broken metate eroding out of the sand in the very southern portion of the peninsula. There are many archaeological sites throughout the region, which speak to the deep histories of these landscapes. 2009.



Landscape scene taken while driving down Highway One in Baja California Sur. This is the same landscape that repelled conquistadors, missionaries, and many others for centuries. This paved highway, which now runs the length of the peninsula, makes the journey quite a bit easier. 2006.





Guard tower and no trespassing sign, located in the far southern portion of the peninsula. With rising land values and ensuing conflicts over title and tenure, scenes like this have become more and more common. Property owners often hire private security guards to protect their lands against squatters and other possible intruders. 2009.



This is a coastal development site in the southern portion of the peninsula. The sign on the right provides some information about the development. Developers buy lots, and then seek investors by advertising the plans for the project. The most expensive properties on this site were listed at around 600,000 USD, just for the land. Similar properties sold for around 10,000 USD in the 1980s. 2009.





This is one of the main beaches in the Los Cabos tourism zone. Tourists, umbrellas, and hotels fill the landscape. Notice the ropes in front of the umbrellas, which are meant to help separate the tourists from local vendors who seek to sell their wares (hats, watches, jewelry, etc). The spatial segregation like this is very common in the tourism zone. 2009.





A long stretch of beach in a part of the peninsula that is relatively undeveloped at present. This is a perfect example of the type of desert landscape that was considered desolate and of little value by many outsiders for centuries. Today, such austere places attract the imaginations (and money) of a multitude of travelers. A few decades ago, the beaches of Los Cabos looked a little more like this. 2009.



This is a small coastal community at the tip of the peninsula. It is composed of citizens from both the US and Mexico. Communities like this are increasingly common throughout the peninsula. This portion of the peninsula, which remains relatively undeveloped at present, has some of the most high demand real estate in the region.





This image shows some of the remnants of Baja California Sur's mining past. This was taken in the inland pueblo of El Triunfo, where mining operations peaked in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. 2009.



Fishing has a long history on the peninsula. Archaeological sites clearly illustrate the fact that early inhabitants depended heavily on marine resources. This continues up to the present day, but in some very different ways. Baja California Sur's oceans host everything from large-scale commercial fishermen and international sport fishermen all the way to small fishing camps like this one, located on the Pacific coast. 2006.





As the traffic up and down the peninsular highway has increased over the years, so have the accidents—many of them fatal. The highway has many roadside shrines and grave markers. This particular shrine is located a short way south of the city of La Paz. 2009.



I mentioned in the main text that many travelers make their way down the peninsula in “Steinbeckesque” vehicles (many of them from the US). There is a long history of tourists and other travelers making their way down the coast in campers, vans, and off-road trucks in search of everything from waves to marlin. There is, in fact, an interesting sub-culture that has developed around these trips to “Baja.” The above image is one recent example of a long-running phenomenon. 2010.





Malinowski had his tent, and I have mine. The bad part about working in a region that has an increasing amount of high-end tourism is that it is can be pretty expensive to find a place to stay. The good thing, however, is that it's usually warm enough to set up a tent and camp. 2010.